

What Is Social Anxiety Disorder (Social Phobia)?



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If you've ever broken out into a blush or started sweating when the center of attention or talking to someone else, then you understand how social anxiety can feel. For some people, social anxiety isn't just an occasional distress. It is a very real, ongoing disruptive disorder that can interfere with regular life.

Definition and Differentiations

Social anxiety disorder is a condition in which you feel extremely uncomfortable, inferior, embarrassed and/or anxious in social or performance situations. It is characterized by the fear of being judged negatively. When the disorder seems to be present in a wide range of situations, it is known as generalized. If it occurs only in certain circumstances, such as going on a date or talking to a boss, it is known as selective or specific. Importantly, those with the disorder understand that their distress is excessive or unreasonable, but they simply can't make the feelings go away.

This condition should not be confused with shyness. It is also not the same as social panic disorder. With social panic disorder, which involves panic attacks, you usually believe that your symptoms are the result of a physical problem, such as believing there's something wrong with your heart because it is racing. Those with this condition avoid social situations because they fear having another panic attack, not because they fear being judged.

Symptoms

The fear of being negatively judged that comes with social anxiety can cause physical symptoms such as sweating, nausea, abdominal discomfort, headache, lightheadedness, increased heart rate, dizziness, muscle twitches and blushing. Some people feel detached or as though they have lost

self-control. The symptoms are often present when talking to strangers or authority figures, being watched or when at the center of attention.

Reasons for Concern

The feelings usually cause sufferers to avoid the situations that cause distress, which can lead to isolation and related problems such as depression. It is hard for those with the condition to make friends or have romantic relationships. The avoidance is also an issue because it can make it very difficult to engage in regular activities of everyday living, such as going to work or school.

Commonality and Onset

For most people, social anxiety disorder begins to present in childhood or adolescence, with the typical age of onset being 13 years old. Estimates from the Anxiety and Depression Association of America place the number of adult people with the condition around 15 million. The disorder is thought to be the third largest psychological disorder in the United States, affecting roughly 7% of the population, according to Dr. Thomas Richards of the Social Anxiety Institute.

Treatment

Social anxiety disorder cannot be cured simply by "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps." Many people try to face their fear head on only to have it reinforced in various ways. Your best bet, therefore, is to find a good therapist who understands that you need to relearn how to feel and react in social situations. This will take time and requires small steps.

By far the most common treatment for social anxiety disorder is cognitive behavioral therapy. Other forms of therapy also are being studied for their effectiveness, however. These include exposure therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, dialectal behavior therapy, interpersonal therapy and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. Regardless of which therapy form a professional might recommend, treatment can be complex, because the disorder can relate to so many other factors in a person's life, such as coming from an abusive home. It is extremely common for people to go for years before getting help--36% of sufferers have symptoms for a decade or more before seeing their doctor or another qualified professional.

Conclusion

Social anxiety disorder is a condition that can disrupt daily activities and lead to other issues such as depression and isolation. Not to be confused with shyness or social panic disorder, it is one of the most common psychological disorders. If you think you have it, your doctor or therapist most likely will try to help you with a recognized form of therapy, the first choice of which probably will be cognitive behavioral therapy. Relief will not happen overnight, but the condition is treatable.

References:

Anxiety and Depression Association of America (2013). Social Anxiety Disorder.

Richards, T. (2013). What Is Social Anxiety?

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